

LES
PAYNE

In '63, Kennedy Lit Rights Lamp

IT HAS BEEN 30 years since that bullet rang out from the Texas Book Depository, or wherever, and dramatically began to change America.

The 1960s were nasty times, and on Nov. 22, 1963, they got infinitely nastier. It was the first in a long series of assassinations. For years to come, Americans would be able to recall just what they were doing when the slugs hit home.

Feb. 21, 1965, was the second hit. The third and fourth came on April 4 and June 5, 1968.

On that bleak November day 30 years ago, I was a newly minted second lieutenant swaggering to lunch at the Fort Bliss officers' club at the moment the rifle slug in Dallas struck.

Starved and pressed in my tropical worsted uniform, I had defended the human rights of strangers that neither I nor my forebears had ever fully enjoyed in our own country. Such cruel contradictions are the birthright of those born into the oppressed classes of this republic.

After graduating from college in Connecticut, I had sought a job as a reporter, but that possibility for me, in those days, was as remote as the Oval Office. There were two newspapers in Hartford, the Times and the Courant. Neither had ever hired a black reporter and would no sooner have hired me than the Klan would have taken me on as its imperial wizard.

Not many of us, two decades ago, got out of the wretched conditions of the ghetto. Some took refuge in the church, others in the bottle, still others made their stand in the pool hall, on the street corner, behind the switchblade — candidates, as Richard Wright wrote, "for the clinics, morgues, prisons, reformatories and the electric chair of the state's death house."

Those of us who escaped had to find a lever. I took my English degree into the Army to hone my leadership skills and learn how to shoot down enemy bombers with Nike Hercules missiles.

My commander-in-chief was John F. Kennedy.

The Irish had never struck me as racially enlightened. But this Irish-Catholic Kennedy, this president, many African-Americans said, seemed different. He spoke eloquently enough, but when pressed, he showed something more. What the downtrodden saw in him was a quality rare in white males and absent in every president since, save Jimmy Carter and perhaps Bill Clinton.

African-Americans gazed upon Kennedy and saw not so much what he was but what, if worked on, he could become.

Coming out of the Eisenhower years, blacks were afforded a new, though exaggerated, sense of the possible humanness of their enemy. As Malcolm X and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. heightened blacks' sense of dignity, Kennedy, in word at least, hiked their expectations of the federal government.

It was not so much what Kennedy did during his short sojourn; it was his style, his boldness, the things he said. On Feb. 28, 1963, in a message to Congress on civil rights, Kennedy diagnosed the effects of racial illness in America:

"Through these long 100 years, while slavery has vanished, progress for the Negro has been too often blocked and delayed . . . Equality before the law has not always meant equal treatment and opportunity. And the harmful, wasteful and wrongful results of racial discrimination and segregation still appear in virtually every aspect of national life, in virtually every part of the nation."

No president, including Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson, has ever spoken this way. Kennedy went on to lay out a blueprint for making things more equal in the areas of voting education, employment, public accommodation, housing and civil rights overall.

In his introduction, Kennedy cited the Emancipation Proclamation as a "first step." He praised Lincoln but noted that he "unhappily did not live to follow up." Nor, of course, did Kennedy.

For on that November day, as I swaggered into the officers' club, Walter Cronkite told us Kennedy had been shot dead in Dallas. The officers gathered around the TV broke into mild applause and scattered cheering. That afternoon, my first sergeant from Mississippi smiled for the first time since I had met him.